



Director's report

Alan Hayes

Tracing the trajectories of children and families

Collaborative involvement in longitudinal research has been an increasingly significant element of the Institute's work. Such datasets represent very rich resources for Institute researchers, colleagues in Commonwealth, state and territory government agencies, the community sector and a steadily growing number of researchers, both in Australia and abroad.

Insights into the paths that children and their families take through life are not only important in their own right but can provide valuable evidence to inform policy and practice. *Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)* is funded through the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA). The Institute is undertaking the study in partnership with FaHCSIA and the Australian Bureau of Statistics, with advice from a consortium of leading academics from across the country. Commenced in 2004, *Growing Up in Australia* is investigating the contribution of children's social, economic and cultural environments to their adjustment and wellbeing and aims to identify opportunities for improving support for children and their families, especially through early intervention and prevention strategies.

The Longitudinal Study of Separated Families (LSSF) is providing similarly valuable insights into the pathways that families take following separation and divorce. Funded by the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department (AGD), the LSSF is a national study following parents with a child under 18 years old who separated after the 2006 family law reforms were introduced. Some 10,000 parents participated in the first survey wave in 2006, with a second wave conducted around 12 months later to gain insight into the challenges facing these families. The Institute has now been engaged to undertake the next stage of the LSSF, with funding being made available for a third wave

of data collection to see how these separated families are faring five years on.

The Australian Temperament Project (ATP) is an ongoing, longitudinal study conducted as a partnership involving research teams at the University of Melbourne, Deakin University and the Institute. The study is following young people's psychosocial development from infancy to adulthood, investigating the contributions of personal, family, peer and broader environmental factors to adjustment and wellbeing. Commencing in 1983, the study has so far collected 15 waves of data across the first 28 years of life. The ATP is investigating the development of problems such as learning difficulties, antisocial behaviour, substance abuse, anxiety and depression, as well as positive development, including social competence, supportive family and peer relationships, and civic participation. With a number of these young people now entering parenthood, the ATP is extending its investigation to this next generation.

Completed in 2008–09, the first phase of the Stronger Families in Australia (SFIA) study was designed to evaluate the Communities for Children (CfC) initiative (an area-based component of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy). Conducted by AIFS in partnership with the Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales, SFIA followed 2,200 families in communities with, and without, CfC funding. The results suggested that the CfC initiative had had small but positive effects on children, families and communities—effects that may become more pronounced over time. The CfC initiative is now a major component of the new Family Support Program. The Institute has been funded by FaHCSIA to undertake a second phase of SFIA that will evaluate the ongoing impact of the CfC initiative on the children, who are now in middle childhood, and on their families. It will also provide evidence on the impact of the CfC Plus initiative, which expands the focus on child protection and service integration.

Communication and dissemination

In parallel with its extensive research program, the Institute also continues to prioritise dissemination of its findings to researchers, policy-makers and Australian families.

Child Family Community Australia

Three of the clearinghouses hosted by the Institute will soon be amalgamated to provide a strong central point of knowledge translation and exchange. Information currently available through the National Child Protection Clearinghouse, Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse, and Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia will be brought together under a new name: Child Family Community Australia (CFCA) Information Exchange. The new information exchange will be a primary source of quality, evidence-based information and resources for professionals. More broadly, the information exchange will be a single port of call for policy-makers, service providers and practitioners, to assist them to improve outcomes for children, families and the communities in which they live. The development of the CFCA Information Exchange is underway, and a new website is expected to be published in early- to mid-2012. Meanwhile, the three clearinghouse sites will remain fully operational and continue to provide relevant publications and resources.

Research registers

Two key research and evaluation registers have been launched recently. These searchable databases are accessible through the Institute website. The Protecting Australia's Children: Research and Evaluation Register includes Australian research and evaluation undertaken since 1995, and has an accompanying publication, *Protecting Australia's Children Research Audit (1995–2010)*, which is available online and in hard copy. The Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault (ACSSA), which is housed at the Institute, has also released the Register of Current Research Into Sexual Assault, which can also be accessed via the AIFS website.

Visits

The Institute continues to share its expertise and experience with colleagues from around the world. Recent international visitors to the Institute include individuals or delegations from Statistics New Zealand, the Thomas Coram Research Unit at the University of London, the Korean Institute for Health and Social Affairs,

the Korean Labor Institute, and the Institute for Family and Gender Studies in Vietnam.

In August, I was pleased to accept an invitation to launch the paper *Transition to School: Position Statement*, at the Albury campus of Charles Sturt University (CSU). This paper was the culmination of an international conference convened by Professors Sue Dockett and Bob Perry at CSU, in October last year. The authors included many of the leading researchers in the field, nationally and internationally. The conference had been undertaken with sponsorship from the Australian, NSW and Victorian governments, the Ian Potter Foundation and the CSU. It was an honour to be asked to launch this groundbreaking document, which should be of considerable value both here and abroad.

AIFS abroad

In addition to the frequent presentations Institute researchers make at national conferences, they are also increasingly invited to make addresses internationally. Dr Ben Edwards recently presented analyses of the LSAC data at the Norwegian Institute of Public Health. His presentations covered child care and early childhood education, school starting age and children's development, and children in rural and regional areas in Australia. The Institute maintains a valuable relationship with the Norwegian Institute, which has been following 100,000 children and their mothers since 1998. Dr Galina Daraganova and Dr Edwards also participated in the conference of the Society for Longitudinal and Life Course Studies in Germany. This conference



Professor Alan Hayes with (from l. to r.) Professors Sue Dockett and Bob Perry, and Associate Professor Kay Margetts, at the launch of the *Transition to School Position Statement*, Charles Sturt University, Albury campus.

brought together a number of major national birth cohort studies from around the world, including our own LSAC. By maintaining collegiate relationships with other organisations undertaking long-term studies of families, the Institute is able to benefit from shared research experiences and expertise, ensure international quality standards are maintained, and identify potential international trends of relevance to Australia.

LSAC/LSIC Conference

For the first time, data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children and the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC) were presented together at the *Growing Up in Australia* and Footprints in Time conference, on 15–16 November. The response from researchers seeking to present a paper at the conference required an extension to the program to accommodate the many worthy presentations on offer. A wide range of topics was addressed, including temperament and home environment, the effects of old and new media on language acquisition, resilience, preschool participation among Indigenous children, language, behavioural and emotional development, and physical and mental health. The quality and range of the program was very well received by participants, many of whom took the opportunity to take part in the data workshops run in conjunction with the conference.

12th AIFS Conference update

Our flagship event for disseminating research findings on factors affecting families—the AIFS Conference—will be held in Melbourne on 25–27 July 2012.

The three eminent keynote speakers are:

- *Dr Willem Adema* currently leads a team of analysts of family and children policies and is responsible for the online OECD Family database and the *Doing Better for Families* policy publication (April 2011).
- *Professor Laura Lein* was appointed Dean and Katherine Reebel Collegiate Professor at the School of Social Work, University of Michigan in 2009, as well as being Professor in the Department of Anthropology. She went to Michigan from the University of Texas at Austin School of Social Work, where she taught for 24 years.
- *Professor Patrick Parkinson* teaches in the Faculty of Law at the University of Sydney. He is the current President of the International Society of Family Law, an international scholarly organisation with

about 650 family law professor members from over 65 nations.

The AIFS conference is the premier event for discussing cutting edge research findings, policy priorities and topical issues important to family wellbeing in Australia. It is an ideal conference for researchers, policy-makers and service providers working with families—parents, children, young people and senior family members.

The call for papers is open until 8 February 2012, via an online abstract submission system. Go to <www.conference.aifs.gov.au/call-for-papers.php> to submit an abstract.

Early bird registrations are also available at <www.conference.aifs.gov.au>.

Concluding thoughts

In September, I had the pleasure of attending a workshop at Admiralty House, in Sydney, hosted by Her Excellency, the Governor-General. The workshop focused on the partnership between the Puuya Foundation and the Indigenous community of Lockhart River, Queensland. This is a very inspiring community development initiative. Along with Elders from the community, Foundation Board Members Denise Hagan and Jim Varghese made presentations on the work of the Foundation. Ms Hagan spent five years as a Senior Executive Service member of the Queensland Government based in the Lockhart River community. The partnership between the local community, government and philanthropic organisations has resulted in improved community capacity, health and wellbeing, and the development of viable Indigenous-owned and operated commercial ventures that offer local employment opportunities. It is a most impressive example of a successful local initiative.

The workshop presented a very positive example of community strengthening and capacity-building. Other “lighthouse” examples of place-based, community-focused initiatives have emerged around the country in recent years. There is much to be learned about the elements that make for their success and how similar approaches can be transferred to other locations. It is also important to better understand the factors that will be important if the gains from such place-based approaches are to be sustained.

